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Race, Community, and Conflict as a methodological classic

Abstract: Rex and Moore's *Race, Community and Conflict* has the status of a modern sociological classic. The argument presented here is that this can be attributed in part to its methodological underpinnings. The use of a combination of methods to collect material on the lives of Sparkbrook residents in the 1960's allowed a more rounded account to be developed than would have been possible had only the originally planned survey been undertaken. The resultant study is by no means perfect, but its underlying ambition and the determination with which the project was seen through have served to inspire subsequent generations of researchers.

Keywords: mixed methods, research teams, survey, ethnography

John Rex and Robert Moore's study *Race, Community, and Conflict* is widely-regarded as a highly-influential piece of sociological investigation. Designed to reach a wide audience, it was described a little over a decade on from its publication in 1967 as 'the most widely read book on race relations within a British context' (Eldridge 1980: 156). It was subsequently one of three examples chosen in A. H. Halsey's *A History of Sociology in Britain* to illustrate how sociologists in the second half of the twentieth century 'produced a solid body of theoretically sophisticated empirical studies' (2004: 8). This discussion comes in a section of Halsey's book that focuses on methods, and in the process Halsey locates the studies as part of a long tradition of British sociology's growing methodological sophistication. Later, Halsey notes that 'Rex and More's study of ethnicity and housing in Birmingham has remained a classic work' (2004: 140), and the enduring interest in the study may be attributed in part at least to the way in which the research was conducted and reported. This was by no means straightforward, given that the subject matter involved racial conflict in the charged political atmosphere of the 1960's. Gordon Marshall has commented that in these circumstances the response rate achieved for the survey element of the study 'represents something of a methodological miracle' (1990: 126), while Moore's (1977) reflections on the ethnographic fieldwork include recollections of threats of violence to which he was exposed. Rex's ambition to produce 'non-trivial sociology' (Blaikie 1993: 187) evidently came with challenges and risks. A further reason for the on-going attention to the book is that Rex and Moore's research practice was controversial amongst fellow academics. For example, the authors became embroiled in a debate with J. G. Davies and J. Taylor whose contemporaneous research in Newcastle upon Tyne produced fundamentally different results, which led Marten Shipman to observe that 'Each pair of authors seems to have sprung from their different ideological viewpoints' (1981: 164). Rex's approach to his discipline treated it as a route to the 'demystification' (1974) of the world. It was, nevertheless, evident to Rex that sociologists' methodological and theoretical pluralism meant that more than one analysis of the phenomenon under investigation would be likely to result, and that a robust case would be needed in support of his preferred interpretation framed in terms of an approach that highlighted the centrality of conflict in social processes. The challenge that the book presented to the 'demonology' (Rex and Moore 1974: 3) to which ethnic minority groups were subject was bound to be contested.

If the Sparkbrook study has stood the test of time better than most other investigations of the period when it was undertaken, this indicates something about the power of its analysis as a fertile source of ideas for subsequent generations of researchers. Put another way, the study may be

considered enduring because of its pioneering character and its preparedness to do things differently. In methodological terms this is apparent in the ambitious and innovative combination of data collection and analysis. The authors' description of their project's objective as investigating Sparkbrook to 'find out who lives there, what primary community ties they have, what their housing situation, economic position and status aspirations are, what associations they form, how these associations interact and how far the various groups are incorporated into urban society as citizens' (1974: 11) had at first led Rex to anticipate Moore as the principal fieldworker 'doing a survey', but as the project proceeded Moore discovered that 'It was my task as the fieldworker to find out these things by whatever methods were appropriate' (1977: 90, 91). The Preface and Acknowledgements of *Race, Community, and Conflict* identifies numerous people who contributed to the fieldwork as part of an extensive team: 'the survey could never have been undertaken without the close and friendly co-operation of Jim Rose and Nicholas Deakin... Alan Shuttleworth and Jennifer Williams made contributions to the book itself through their research and writing. Edward Laing helped us with some participant observation in the West Indian community. Gillian Lee helped us with much of the more tedious and difficult work of data processing, and Gillian Lloyd provided us with much useful information while carrying on investigations for her undergraduate dissertation' (1974: xv). The methods that the team employed thus included not only the survey that had been planned from the outset and which is described in detail in the book's appendix (1974: 286-94) but also participant observation, and the documentary research into the development of Birmingham's housing and race relations policies undertaken by Shuttleworth, who 'worked through the back numbers of the local newspapers' (Moore 1977: 93). The contribution of Williams was to write up the chapter on the younger generation, based on her interviews with teachers in schools and on short essays written by 335 pupils on topics including 'the story of my life so far' and 'My life from leaving school till retirement' (Rex and Moore 1974: 233). This latter topic drew inspiration from Thelma Veness's 1962 study *The School-Leavers* later used by Ray Pahl (1978) in his Sheppey research which also sought to learn from young people's imagined futures. In addition, Rex and Moore conducted interviews with 'key actors at the city level' (Moore 1977: 94), while the book also includes maps and photographs that help to give readers a sense of place.

This combination of methods that underpinned *Race, Community, and Conflict* anticipated developments in the field of mixed methods, an approach that has become increasingly sophisticated in the intervening period. Debates about how the data generated through the use of diverse methods might be analysed and the findings knitted together into a coherent account have led Jennifer Mason (2006) to identify six strategies underpinning mixed methods research, and it will be apparent to readers of *Race, Community, and Conflict* that the authors fell some way short of the current ideal whereby 'Researchers engaging in mixed methods research need to have a clear sense of the logic and purpose of their approach and of what they are trying to achieve, because this ultimately must underpin their practical strategy not only for choosing and deploying a particular mix of methods, but crucially also for linking their data analytically' (2006: 3). It is rather the case that the book has a strong sense of an ad hoc process in relation to the selection and combination of methods, although once selected these were followed through with determination. The collection of data on no fewer than 97% of their sample of Sparkbrook household members is indeed as Marshall comments 'a truly remarkable achievement' (1990: 127), given that these people were members of what would now be termed hard to reach groups, whose mobility and ethnic minority status both militated against ease of access. Moore recounts how 'The questionnaire had to be administered in

difficult circumstances: the population of Sparkbrook... was fluid, with tenants moving from house to house at quite short notice; many worked irregular hours; many spoke little or no English' (1977: 99-100). With admirable candour, he also describes how the interviews were conducted by student volunteers who were sent back into the field even when 'cold, exhausted and weeping' (1977: 100). Moore's determination to collect what became a mass of data also included his own extensive ethnographic fieldwork, the results of which commentators agree come across effectively in the book. As Roger Gomm observes, the passage in which Rex and Moore (1974: 57) mention cats stalking one another in the gardens of Claremont Road is 'an inconsequential detail with regard to ethnic relations, but consequential in the sense that it gives an impression that they really were there, on location, doing the research' (2008: 316). These and similar passages thus perform an important rhetorical function in relation to readers (Edmondson 1984: 158), who will be left unsurprised that the book included only 'a very small portion' of the ethnographic material collected by Moore as he 'ate in the cafes, did [his] shopping in the shops, and drank ginger beer in the pubs' (1977: 95). The findings included in the book are a selection from what was available, but readers are being persuaded that they are a faithful selection.

This point about rhetoric also figures in assessments of the book and its handling of politics. Les Back and John Solomos have argued that 'it is incumbent on researchers to make public the methods, values and assumptions on which their work is based'. Their assessment that in Rex's extensive body of work 'there exist glaring absences on these issues' (2004: 475) has some truth to it, but perhaps these are less glaring in the case of *Race, Community and Conflict* when it is judged by the standards of its time. The inclusion of details about the survey as an appendix stands as one instance of the authors' openness to critical scrutiny, and Moore's candour in his 1977 article is another; in the latter, the reflections on fieldwork ethics and covert research are ahead of their time. There is also merit in the preparedness of Rex and Moore to explore the potential of the idea of housing classes to make sense of the conflict between ethnic groups by which they were confronted, and although the notion did not survive the critical scrutiny to which it was subjected, it is noteworthy that Rex and Moore contributed to that debate sparked by the book by acknowledging that their initial formulation was problematic and needed more thinking through (Crow and Allan 1994: 115-8). If Rex and Moore were guilty of ad hoc theorisation in their identification of housing classes, they would not be alone; the parallel might be drawn, for example, with Pierre Bourdieu's ad hoc identification of different types of capital (Bennett *et al.* 2009: 258). Furthermore, it is worth noting that they were attempting to make sense of a fluid, dynamic situation that was developing rapidly as migration patterns re-shaped the profile of inner-city neighbourhoods in Birmingham and elsewhere. Their recourse to the ideas of the Chicago School, in particular the idea of a 'zone of transition', was also not without its problems, but it served the purpose of highlighting the need to locate conflict over housing in time as well as space. In this respect, it may be regarded as helping to pave the way for the later adoption of other theoretical framings of urban life, such as Henri Lefebvre's (1996) discussion of 'the right to the city', or the on-going debates about the fluidity of 'urban villages' that were subsequently to be colonised by waves of middle-class gentrifiers (Butler and Robson 2003).

John Eldridge's assessment of the reasons for the impact that Rex and Moore's study had highlights its capacity to provide 'a sense of the inter-connectedness of social life', how immigrants' lives related to 'the churches, the schools, the political parties and the immigrant associations' (1980: 158). This list of topics of investigation overlaps significantly with the chapter headings used in the classic community study of Middletown conducted by the Lynds (1929), and it confirms what an

ambitious project it is to endeavour to portray communities in the round. Such studies are relatively rare, partly because of the sheer time and effort required to undertake them. The teams led by Margaret Stacey in Banbury (Stacey et al 1975) and Ray Pahl in Sheppey (Pahl 1984) are comparable in this respect, and it is instructive that there has to date been no re-study of Sparkbrook. John Rex and Sally Tomlinson's (1979) *Colonial Immigrants in a British City* has several of the characteristics of a follow-up study in another inner-city part of Birmingham (Handsworth), including being the result of a large team effort, and one of its chapters is entitled 'race, community and conflict'. More recently Geoff Dench and his colleagues' (2005) *The New East End* may be considered to have revived the genre, in a study that shows that race, housing and urban politics have lost none of their contentiousness as research topics, and none of what Rex and Moore called their 'immense practical political importance' (1974: 1).

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